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ABSTRACT

This follow-up study investigated the self-concept of students who had received an additional year of readiness experiences before entering first grade to see if their good self-concept in the first grade was sustained over a period of 6 years. Of 100 participants in an original study that found the self-concepts of first grade readiness subjects to be higher than those of retained subjects, 60 were available for follow-up. Of the 60, 34 had successfully passed all grades and were in sixth grade, and 26 had been retained and were in fifth grade. All were given the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. Findings indicated that fifth-grade students did not sustain their first-grade self-concept level. Although the results of the sixth-grade group were not statistically significant, their mean score was four points higher than that of the first-grade retained group. This could indicate that starting school in the developmental class had a positive effect on the development of the sixth graders' self-concept. A review of participants' fourth-grade scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills indicated that the mean score of the development group was higher than the mean score of the retained group, although the difference was not statistically significant. (RH)

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PRE-FIRST GRADE: A YEAR TO GROW

A FOLLOW UP STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the self concept of students who had received an additional year of readiness before first grade to see if their good self concept was sustained over a six year period. A study conducted during the students' first grade year found that the self concepts of those students who were placed in a pre first grade were statistically higher than the self concept of same age students who were repeating first grade. Although results were not statistically higher in the follow-up study, students currently in the sixth grade who received the additional readiness year still maintained a good self concept based on their performance on the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale.

The importance of the first year of school cannot be over-emphasized. It is a time when the child forms attitudes about school and himself which he will carry with him for the rest of his life. His entire school career is built upon this foundation. It is the responsibility of educators to provide the child with a strong foundation based on his individual needs. Educators have the responsibility to provide for the individual differences in children. They should not just talk about what should be done but should really believe in and provide for the individual and his needs when he comes to school (Price, 1972).

Year after year there are thousands of children in the schools whose needs are not met. Each school year children fail to meet prescribed standards of performance and, as a consequence, are retained at the same grade level. Research indicates that a child who is having serious academic difficulties in one grade is likely to continue having difficulties if promoted to the next grade (Bocks, 1977). However, research does not clearly indicate how repetition of a grade is likely to reduce these difficulties. Few schools offer any substantial special help to repeating pupils. Instead, they are recycled through a program that was inappropriate for them the first time and that may be equally inappropriate, and of less interest to them, the second time (Jackson, 1975).

More attention must be given to a consideration of students early in their educational careers. Curricula must be developed to fit the needs of students rather than to pre-conceived standards.

Remediation always comes after children have failed. Steps need to be taken to prevent failure in the first place. Research indicates that intervention programs to aid "at risk" students in first grade have been successful (Chaplin, 1979).

Some children enter first grade ready to begin their formal academic education and willing to conform to the school situation. Entry into first grade is based on a child's chronological age. However, a child who has a chronological age of six may have a developmental age that is somewhat younger. The developmental age refers to the level on which a child is functioning. If a child is not ready developmentally, he will probably fail to learn. The child who is placed in school before he is ready is asked to perform at a level beyond his abilities. No matter how hard the child tries he cannot do as well as expected.

Almost from the start, some children begin to conform to school norms and incorporate the goals of learning (Landsberger, Kingsley and Pratto, 1976). Their actual success in learning leads to more satisfying experiences and to their developing self esteem. These characteristics continue to develop, with positive reinforcement, and a successful student is formed. Conversely, children who reject school norms and the goals of learning become less positive in school behavior. Landsberger, et al., state that a cycle of failure has been set in motion which produces non-readers at the end of first grade and the child is met with school failure.

A study to investigate the effectiveness of sensory integrative therapy as an intervention method on a group of first grade children, considered to be a risk for later reading failure, was conducted by Grimwood and Rutherford (1980). Twenty-one randomly selected children were included in the study. The eleven children in the experimental group were removed from the class for therapy on a rotational basis, so that no child was absent from any one lesson regularly. Following two half-hour therapy sessions per week, over a period of twenty-four weeks, the experimental group was significantly higher than the control group on measures of reading ability. These gains were maintained over a two-year non-intervention period.

Paramore, Plantec and Hospodar (1973) conducted a two year tutoring experiment involving first grade students identified by their teacher at the beginning of the school year as capable of normal achievement but having learning difficulties. An experimental group received tutoring two times a week for one hour sessions. Data collected indicated that tutoring was effective in helping students improve their rates of progress in reading and their self-esteem.

Wilson, Hewett, Sheets and Thomas (1979) report that the pre-first grade transition room program provides a most promising approach to help students having learning problems. Placement in a special class with a lower than usual teacher-pupil ratio, where a child can obtain individual instruction in the areas of need, can provide a smooth transition to the first grade. A longitudinal study was conducted to evaluate transition room classes in two districts.

Results of the study indicated that while transition room students tended to achieve less well on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills than their peers, the achievement gap was closed by the end of sixth grade. Galloway and George (1986) report on a program in Chesterfield County, Virginia, to improve children's chances of early success. A junior kindergarten was piloted in thirteen elementary schools. Because of its success, it was instituted in all the county's elementary schools the following year. Junior kindergarten is a year-long alternative program for children of school age who are not developmentally ready for kindergarten. It is designed to prevent early failure. Although these children may take three years to complete kindergarten and first grade, they experience daily success. Because these are the children who would most likely have to repeat kindergarten or first grade, placement in a junior kindergarten generally does not add additional years to their schooling.

What students believe about themselves vitally affects every aspect of their behavior and learning. An individual's self concept is developed as a result of the experiences he has had. By the time a child reaches school age, his self concept is quite well formed. His reactions to learning and to his school success or failure will be determined by the beliefs and attitudes he has about himself. The most important ideas that an individual will ever possess are those that he will have about himself.

For generations, teachers have sensed the positive relationship between a student's concept of himself and his performance in school (Purkey, 1970). The pre-first grade program is structured so that the

child meets success instead of failure which enables him to develop a sense of self worth and a good self concept. Although most of the research in self-concept has dealt with older children, there have been some significant studies conducted with young children. Wattenberg and Clifford (cited by Canfield and Wells, 1976) studied kindergarten students to see if self concept was a predictor of reading success. Studying the same children, two and a half years later, they found that children with low (poor) self concepts did not learn to read or did not read as well as children with high (good) self concepts.

A study conducted by Brookaver, Paterson and Thomas (cited by Millard, 1978) concluded that one's concept of his academic ability is associated with academic achievement at each grade level. Millard contends that there is a strong relationship between a student's scholastic success and his self-image.

In summary, every child should be considered individually, not as a part of a system-wide policy (Goodlad, 1952). Educators must adjust to the needs of the child. One way to do this is to provide alternative situations for children having academic difficulty. "Transition classes that require three years to complete two grades are often more acceptable to parents and school personnel because retention tends to lose social stigma if it is presented in the form of a transition class" (Liberman, 1980, p 44). The transition class provides a promising approach to help students who have early learning problems (Wilson, et al., 1979).

The original study examined the differences in self concept and in first grade achievement between students who have been in a pre-first grade program and those who were repeating first grade. The population of this study was first grade students in Richmond County, Georgia, who had been members of a pre-first grade class or who were repeating the first grade. The sample groups for this study included students in five elementary schools. The selected schools were those where the socioeconomic background of the students was similar (indicated by the percentage of free and reduced lunches) and where there were an adequate number of retained first grade children to form a sample group.

A total of 136 students (82 boys, 54 girls) was available for this study. From this group, a sample pool was formed of all students who would be eight years old during the current school year (birthdates falling between September 1, 1974, and August 31, 1975) and who had not been identified as needing special education. From the sample pool, two groups of 50 were formed based on their previous grade placement.

All first grade students are given the Metropolitan Readiness Test and the Otis Lennon Mental Ability Test at the beginning of the school year. At the end of twelve weeks, the McDaniel-Pier Young Children's Self Concept Scale and the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), Level B-Form S were administered.

The McDaniel-Pier Young Children's Self Concept Scale was administered to examine the self concept of the two groups of students. This instrument was administered to groups of five or six children. It was given previous to the achievement test so that the test administrator could establish rapport with the students. The self concept of the two groups was assessed by comparing their mean scores. The Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), which is normed for students who are in the middle of first grade, was administered to test academic achievement.

The students in the original study, which was conducted in 1982, should now be in the sixth grade. In order to investigate whether the self concept of the developmental group was sustained, a follow-up study was conducted.

Of the original one hundred participants, sixty are still attending school in Richmond County. Fifty-seven percent (34) have successfully passed all grades and are currently in the sixth grade. Forty-three percent (26) have been retained at some time in their elementary school years and are currently in the fifth grade.

The Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale was administered to all students in the study. The edition used is intended for children and adolescents ages 8 to 18 years. The reading difficulty of the scale is approximately at a third-grade level, as assessed by two commonly used readability indexes (Flesch, 1948; Fry, 1968).

For statistical reporting, the students were separated into groups by grade. In the fifth grade, the developmental group did not sustain their self-concept level. Although the results of the sixth grade group were not statistically significant, their mean score was four points higher than the first grade retained group. (See Table 1) This could indicate that their start in school in the developmental class did have a positive effect on the development of their self concept.

In reviewing the school records of the participants, it was observed that there were variences in the IQ scores but the differences were not appreciable. All participants took the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) in the fourth grade. Although not statistically significant, the mean score of the developmental group was higher than the mean score of the retained group (see Table 2).

Table 1

Self Concept

Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale

	Pre-First (6th Grade Group)	Retained (6th Grade Group)
N	16	18
Mean Score	59.5	55.5

Table 2

Achievement

Iowa Test of Basic Skills

	6th Grade Group		5th Grade Group	
	Pre-First	Retained	Pre-First	Retained
N	16	18	14	12
Mean Score	107	106.38	103.28	100.25

The mean ITBS score of the fifth grade group alone was three points higher than the mean ITBS score of the retained group. These results indicate that even though the developmental group had a year of readiness before entering first grade, they have caught up to the original retained group. In the original study, the retained group had the higher mean achievement score, although the results were not statistically significant. The extra year of readiness did not seem to hinder the developmental group. There is no lag in their current achievement and they are working at grade level, meeting their current grade expectations.

The question arises as to why forty-three percent of the students in the current study failed another grade since their first grade placement. The forty-three percent was comprised of students in both the retained and developmental groups. If the purpose of the developmental class was to give students a year to grow, a year to mature and a year of readiness, then why did they fail another grade? These children did not necessarily have just a developmental lag. When identified for the program, it was recognized that they needed some type of additional help before they would meet success in first grade placement. The developmental class may not have identified their special needs but it was felt it was a more educationally sound placement than meeting failure from the start in first grade. Many of these students have since been identified as students with other learning problems; such as learning disorders, behavior disorders, slow learners.

The sixth grade group had few special problems. Only three students in the retained group and only one student in the developmental group have, to this point, been identified as having learning or behavior disorders.

A study conducted by Brookaven, Paterson and Thomas (cited by Millard, 1978) concluded that the self concept of one's academic ability is associated with academic achievement at each grade level. Millard contends that there is a strong relationship between a student's scholastic success and his self image. The study being discussed in this paper concurs with Millard. The developmental group, now in the sixth grade, has a better self concept than the retained group and they have closed the gap in the area of academic achievement (see Tables 1 & 2). Students who experience repeated success in school are likely to develop positive feelings about their abilities.

In summary, educators must adjust to the needs of the child. One way to do this is to provide alternative situations for children having academic difficulty. "Transition classes that require three years to complete two grades are often more acceptable to parents and school personnel because retention tends to lose social stigma if it is presented in the form of a transition class" (Liberman, 1980, p 44) The transition class provides a promising approach to help students who have early learning problems (Wilson, et al., 1979).

The additional pre-school year, transition or developmental clsss, is not seen as repetition, which generally carries connotations of failure. The additional year is when development and learning ususally proceed at a pace suited to each individual's developmental needs.

The developmental class in Richmond County, Georgia, is still in existence. It has become firmly established as an alternative to first grade placement for a child who is "not ready" or "at risk".

The study was conducted to see if placement in a developmental class does make a difference in a child's overall school achievement and self concept. With the mean scores of the ITBS and the Piers Harris Self Concept Scale being slightly higher for the developmental sixth grade group, it is contended that the developmental year is beneficial.

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